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AUTHOR Robinson, H. Alan
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ABSTRACT

What whole language is and is not, what whole language instruction is and is not, and whether "subskills" can be integrated into a whole language approach are topics worthy of consideration. Whole language is natural language within a given context and in relation to a given situation. Isolated bits of language used for exercise rather than for real communication are not natural language. Language which is not a unit, which does not have a sensible beginning and ending, and which does not serve to communicate within a meaningful context for a given purpose is not whole language. Whole language instruction includes the teaching and learning of skills and/or strategies within a setting in order to accomplish a goal that cements, extends, and expands learning. It is not the planned teaching of skills in a sequence over time. It is frequently coupled with an integrated or thematic approach to learning. This approach is consistent with a whole language approach but is not mandatory. The role of the whole language teacher includes developing strategies for dealing with fragments of language, such as objective and standardized tests. Subskills instruction can be subsumed in a whole language approach to reading instruction if the subskills are recognized as reading purposes and major organizational strategies. Learning and functioning through language is the process as well as the goal of whole language instruction. (RS)

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Whole Language and Whole Language Instruction: A Definition

by H. Alan Robinson

Hofstra University

This presentation is developed through two topics and a question.

1. What whole language is and isn't.

2. What whole language instruction is and isn't.

3. Can what have been called subskills, on the surface antithetical to whole language, be integrated into a whole language approach to reading instruction?

As I develop each of the two topics and then attempt to answer the question, I know you will realize that the discussion, although based on fact, is representative of my own perspective. Although you will probably agree with many of my tenets, you might wish to include other descriptors and add other emphases. So now let me present my views and begin with the first topic: What whole language is and isn't.

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The concept of whole language may be likened to the psychological principle of gestalt: a unified whole; an organized field having specific properties that cannot be derived from the summation of its component parts. One traditional way of defining language is by describing four major aspects, inseparable in function although each can be studied or emphasized temporarily for specific purposes. As you know, these parts are: phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics--(a) the phonological, referring to the sound or pronunciation system of language; (b) the morphological, referring to the meaning structure of words; (c) the syntactic, referring to the structure of the phrases, clauses, and sentences in a language; and (d) the semantic, referring to the varied, contextual meanings of words in sentences and paragraphs. In referring to the components of written discourse, the orthographic or graphological is added, referring to the written symbols of a language.

In light of the contributions made today, particularly from the fields of psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, information processing, and cognitive psychology, another component of language is text structure which refers to the syntactic-semantic organization of large, coherent, and cohesive chunks of text. Story grammar is a part of the concept of text structure which refers to the understanding of the development of narrative text. Text structure or story grammar are dependent upon all of the other language constituents. They can only exist in whole language.

One other term, pragmatics, is used frequently--not in reference to the structure of language as the terms already mentioned, but in reference to <u>how</u> language is used. For example, "How do you do" is understood by native speakers of American English as a term of greeting. Its actual meaning is only vaguely related to the situation in which it is employed. Non-native speakers unfamiliar with such expressions are usually confused when hearing them and feel that some response is necessary that indicates they are being asked about how they do something. Hence, the concept of pragmatics is meaningless in isolation for it can only be explained as a contextual and situational relationship.

Language, then, has parts, but it is only functional in its wholeness with emphasis on what it means in given situations. In oral speech, or even in written discourse, when the setting is conversational or when the situation involves survival, individual words, phrases, or clauses may stand on their own as long as the context is clear, i.e., good morning or Danger! (shouted with authority at the oral level or written with a capital D and followed by an exclamation point). In most situations, however, larger chunks of language are necessary for communication.

Although we have traditionally viewed the sentence as the conveyor of an independent thought, it is rarely true, except syntactically. For instance, "There is the dog" is a sentence, but it is hardly an independent thought. "Where

is the dog?" "What dog?" That sentence obviously depends upon other sentences and the knowledge of the reader or listener to give it any kind of full meaning. In reality, the paragraph may be the smallest whole language unit, but even that is doubtful. For meaning to be clear it is usually necessary to use at least several paragraphs with all aspects of language working together, like a symphony or a painting, and even then meaning depends upon a successful interaction or transaction between speaker and listener or reader and writer.

Whole language is what we know and use daily in both informal and formal speech. It is also what we read when we pick up a book for pleasure, when we peruse a letter, or even when we read an assigned chapter in a textbook. Whole language has purpose and counts on all of its parts to function together in order to accomplish the aim of communication. Whole language is natural language, that is, it is natural within a given context and in relation to a given situation. A meaningful conversation is natural language. The language of a piece of literature is natural. The information written by a content area author can be natural language within a school situation when read for a meaningful purpose. Isolated bits of language used for exercise rather than for real communication are not natural language. Natural language is natural to the situation and the purpose of a given event. Language events do occur in school and in other contexts where what would not be natural

and whole language outside of those contexts is natural within those contexts.

Any one part of what some theorists have called our language cueing systems is not whole language. Therefore, of course, isolated phonemes (sound units) or morphemes (meaning units) which rarely communicate beyond survival meanings are really not whole language. Words in lists or written on chalkboards in isolation or devoid of context beyond the artificiality of created sentences are not whole language. This does not mean to say that the stating, hearing, reading, or writing of individual words may not be considered part of whole language. They only become less than whole language when they are used outside of a context recognized as meaningful to those participating in the language experience. You remember my example of "good morning" in a conversational setting and the ability to read "danger" as a survival necessity. Such small language units make sense, are meaningful, and are part of whole language whenever they operate within a purposeful context.

Two examples of non-whole language are the small chunks of language on many standardized reading tests and in many workbooks. When confronted by themselves, outside of the development of a meaningful context (which is difficult to generate), they have little to do with either the assessment or practice of whole language.

In other words, language which is not a unit, which doesn't have a sensible beginning and ending, and which

doesn't serve to communicate within a meaningful context for a given purpose is not whole language.

Now let's turn to topic two: what whole language instruction is and isn't.

In whole language instruction the classroom is a language environment. Real and meaningful opportunities for using language (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) are visible throughout the room. The purposes for engaging in these activities are foremost; the learning of language skills are subsumed. The language demands of real life activities, the enjoyment and appreciation of literature, and content area themes occupy the bulk of the learning-teaching time.

Although the focus is on thinking as well as the acquisition of information and ideas from a variety of content areas, there is direct and incidental teaching of strategies to accomplish those content goals. The teaching is accomplished, as much as possible, through dealing with given curricular and real-life tasks. Language is used as the important tool for understanding and enhancing the understanding of important concepts and propositions.

At times, reading or listening or speaking or writing is utilized separately for given learning or functional purposes, but normally each of the language arts is not isolated for instruction. All are employed in solving a problem, learning a content, exploring a concept. Since

learning usually involves all the modes or components of language, any given task will involve speaking, listening, reading, and writing. There is no reading period when only reading is taught. An assignment that asks for the reading of a chapter or a story, at one point or another, includes speaking, listening, and writing. An assignment that asks for the writing of any type of text almost always involves the other components of language. Each component facilitates and strengthens learning in addition to making the transfer of strategy and knowledge more feasible. Metacognitive strength is more enabled by the gestalt of whole language instruction than through piecemeal teaching.

When necessary, emphasis may be placed on a specific skill, strategy, or purpose in order to achieve the goal of understanding a task. On rare occasions a given workbook page or an isolated passage might serve as one piece of material useful in teaching a given strategy. For example, a class is studying the importance of the discovery of steel as a way of improving our way of life. They discuss their knowledge about steel prior to dealing with their text. They then survey the appropriate chapter and decide that an important part of their learning should be to know how steel is made. Next, the students attempt to read the section in their text that deals with the steps in producing steel. A number of students, however, find difficulty in being able to follow the steps in the process; their problem seems to be in untangling steps when they are presented with descriptive

material inbetween. They discuss the steps and are guided in writing them out in order to reinforce understanding. But they need further assistance because they will meet the same pattern in related tasks. Waiting until they get to the next task might promote additional failure.

The teacher locates an article, in an old encyclopedia, with a similar but clearer pattern. She reproduces the article for those students and guides them through the reading helping them learn to put aside the incidental, descriptive material. Then the teacher finds, on a workbook page from a series of isolated lessons on sequencing, a set of three paragraphs dealing with the steps in producing steel pins. The content is related and the pattern is similar in structure to the passage on the process of making steel; it contains descriptive material interwoven with the steps. The teacher turns to this material with the several students and has them find the steps in producing a pin; assistance is offered on demand. (Further passages can be located if the students need more help before they are able to cope with the task independently.) Then the teacher returns, with the students, to the original material to be sure the steps in the process are understood. The teacher has the students write the steps as a part of the process of understanding.

In the example, even though, for a time, attention was placed primarily on the strategy of dealing with a pattern and not on the content itself, the purpose and the context placed the task within the framework of whole language. The

teacher, eager to have the students understand the sequence in the process of making steel, also had in mind the goal of helping students cope with the structure of the material within and beyond the given task. An important objective was the development of metacognitive ability in dealing with such a pattern.

The material did not find the teacher; the teacher found and used materials for her specific purposes. She did not follow a skill sequence which suggested that it was time to teach steps in a process. The content and the strategy were developed together as part of a real reading purpose in a specific learning situation.

It is also possible, within the framework of a whole language approach, to teach students essential strategies which focus on fragments of language. Foremost of such tasks are objective and standardized tests which call upon students to read and answer questions about small bits of print isolated from anything we might normally consider natural or whole language. We may decry the existence of such tests but they do exist and we must cope with them. The development of strategies for dealing with such tasks is part of the role of the whole language teacher. Emphasis must be placed on helping students to process such material as accurately and as rapidly as possible as they are real-life tasks for the student at this point in time. Stress on prediction while reading and experience with the types of questions on such tests are helpful approaches. Coupled with such specific

assistance is also the overall emphasis throughout the school year on strategies for coping with directions; for reading short self-contained items in magazines, newspapers, etc.; for prediction formulation when listening and reading; and for learning to generate questions before reading or listening to a presentation--sometimes during the process of reading and usually after the process.

Whole language instruction, then, allows for all of the necessary tasks visible in a curriculum. The learning situation, however, is not generally skills-oriented but idea-oriented. When skills and/or strategies are learned and taught, they are purposeful to both the teacher and the learner within the context of the moment. As indicated earlier, this does not mean that whole language instruction is eclectic and unstructured. Whole language instruction is planned and can be utilized to deal with the curriculum of a given grade, a school, a school system. Learning centers, story telling, language experience approaches, capitalization on the arts, individualized reading, structured strategies used for helping students read complex materials, and many other strategies and aids are all a part of such instruction.

Whole language instruction is frequently coupled with an integrated or thematic approach to learning, that is, when there is an attempt to bring many subjects together around a large topic rather than treat each subject separately. This approach is consistent with a whole language approach but is not mandatory. In fact, at times it becomes clumsy and gets

in the way of learning. When it is feasible, the approach tends to make learning and communication meaningful to all participants. When it is forced, the gains are upset by the losses.

Whole language instruction is not the planned teaching of skills in a sequence over time. Whole language instruction does include the teaching and learning of skills and/or strategies within a setting in order to accomplish a goal that cements, extends, and expands learning. Frequently a strategy may consist of a sequence of skills constructed in order to unlock a group of related ideas. For example, an instructional goal might be the understanding of how mountains are formed. The teacher, in advance, decides to use both science and social studies materials in approaching the problem. He knows that students will need to be helped to think through sequences in written and oral language and will need introductory assistance in integrating information from two content areas. This is a different approach from that of the authors of a teacher's guide of a basal reader who decide (usually) first on the skills to be taught and then attempt to build materials with which such skills may be practiced.

Whole language instruction, then, uses whole language as a way of learning meaningful, purposeful, and often enjoyable ideas. Individual skills or strategies are frequently taught directly but are always subsumed by ideas. The skills and strategies are means to an end not ends in themselves.

Now to the question: Can what have been called subskills, on the surface antithetical to whole language, be integrated into a whole language approach to reading instruction?

I'm sure I have not left much doubt in your minds as to how I must answer this question. But there are several ifs. If a teacher believes that part of language can be isolated and taught as a strategy for unlocking words, the whole language approach is not for that teacher. Some teachers seem to feel that a subskills approach to reading instruction consists of a planned, sequential program of phonics or phoneme-grapheme correspondence in which language is broken down into minute skills or pieces of learning. Of course, it can be, but the result is not a strategy which can be trusted in unlocking the pronunciation and meaning of a word or words. If a teacher believes that the power of the reader, at any level, is enhanced by keeping language as intact as possible, then that teacher will be pleased with the whole language approach. Readers should learn about phoneme-grapheme correspondence when needed, of course, but that knowledge should be a part of an approach that includes the development of student power in using syntactic and semantic knowledge in relation to the context of the reading situation and purpose. The reader who comes to a word she or he is not sure of should command, dependent upon the level of development, as much of a comprehensive strategy for

unlocking word meanings as possible. This is true for the beginning reader as well. I do not accept the thesis that beginning readers have to be limited in the scope of what they know about language. They know plenty. We shouldn't ask them to put aside this knowledge while we teach them some phonics.

If comprehension is viewed as a list of subskills that must be taught through worksheets and workbooks, one at a time, the whole language approach should not be considered. As indicated at the beginning of this presentation, the parts do not equal the whole. Comprehension and comprehending are tied together by subtle text- and schema-related interactions. Comprehension is the new product created through the interaction or transaction between reader and writer. Comprehending is the process of reading. Both involve many levels of understanding.

If a classroom or remedial reading teacher is using chapters in textbooks or literary selections as the arena for teaching what has been listed as comprehension subskills throughout the years (finding main ideas, finding related details, drawing conclusions, etc.), this type of teaching is an improvement over workbooks but is not really within the conceptual framework of whole language teaching. In this kind of teaching skills are the goal and content is the medium rather than vice versa. Frequently this teaching of skills through the use of natural or real materials is looked upon favorably when a remedial reading program changes from a

pull-out to an in-class program applying skills to given content areas. It is a movement, but on a continuum of zero to ten with isolated subskills as zero and whole language as ten, I rate the phonics-workbook approach as zero and the emphasis on comprehension skills inserted into a whole or natural language context about a four or five.

If a teacher believes that there are school and life purposes for reading which impinge on the way the reading is carried out and call for a focused response, you can integrate such purposes, in fact you must, into a whole language approach to reading instruction. The so-called comprehension skills become purposes for reading. That is, finding a main idea or a superordinate idea may be, indeed, a purpose for reading in a given situation. Even finding a particular detail is a valid purpose under certain circumstances. Probably the most often used "skill" in traditional teaching is main idea. Teachers and authors of instructional materials often speak of stated main ideas and inferred main ideas. In fact, many paragraphs have been structured in order to have students become excellent main idea readers. Supposedly a stated main idea is at the literal level of comprehension and the inferred in the area of higher-level thinking. But inference can't really be left out in either case. When the purpose for reading is to find a stated main idea, the student must be able to make numerous inferences. He or she must understand the total text in order to decide on which of the many statements might

incorporate the main idea. This is not an easy task and it only becomes more reasonable when the material to be processed is within the schema-range of the reader, and the text develops a comprehensive enough unit of meaning so the reader may make feasible predictions and decisions.

If, in a whole language instructional program, the teacher concentrates on useful, whole language strategies, the reader will accept the need to hone his/her ability and be pleased with whole language instruction that sometimes emphasizes the means --learning how, for example, to brainstorm, to predict, to generate semantic organizers, to write for different purposes, to understand sequence, to summarize. Summarizing, when used as a means of enabling learners to organize what they have heard or read, is a particularly fine but complex strategy for promoting whole language comprehension and retention.

Human beings want to, and need to, organize and make sense out of their worlds. They are sidetracked when emphasis is placed on isolated bits and pieces. This is true for all learners--learning disabled, gifted, normal. So, yes, subskills instruction can be subsumed in a whole language approach to reading instruction if those so-called subskills are recognized as reading purposes and major organizational strategies. They are important and need to be taught if not known, but they must never be ends unto themselves. The mastery of strategies or skills has no significance unless they are viewed, by teacher and student,

as tools for constructing meaning and coping with realistic communication tasks. Learning and functioning through language is the process as well as the goal of whole language instruction.